

The situation of Muslims in France, with special focus on the reality of Muslim women and gender islamophobia

Fatima Bent

Lallab is a feminist and anti-racist association whose aim is to make the voices of Muslim women heard and to defend the rights of Muslim women who are at the centre of (at least) sexist, racist and Islamophobic oppressions. Lallab wants to change the French and European anti-discrimination policies and respond to a forgotten need by building concrete and specific solutions for Muslim women. We open a new path for the defence of women's rights by empowering Muslim women to be the actors of their own emancipation.

Our vision is to create a world where every woman can fulfil herself without fear of judgement, discrimination, or abuse. Our mission is to create an environment, resources and tools that promote the freedom of every Muslim woman to define her identity and life path.

We bring a paradigm shift in the French political system in the fighting discrimination – especially sexist, racist, and anti-Muslim discrimination. Our work revolves around 3 main objectives: we want Muslim women to organise themselves to renew bonds of solidarity, to produce narratives and tools, and participate in the design and implementation of inclusive policies for a more informed, adapted and effective fight.

Representation of Muslim women in the media:

Islamophobia in France is part of a general context of social, spatial and symbolic discrimination against Muslims and people perceived as Muslim.

For many years and still today, at the media level, Muslim women have been subjected to a paradoxical silence: the media constantly talk about them, without ever giving them a voice. They are portrayed as a monolithic bloc, erasing the plurality of their experiences, and only explain the inequalities and violence they experience through the prism of their culture and religion. At the same time, political institutions participate in the creation of a narrative in which Muslim women are either submissive victims or dangerous accomplices of an Islam that threatens Republican values. This negative attention and the hegemonic patriarchal and racist discourse towards Muslim women



in the media and political discourse also contributes to creating fertile ground for discriminatory practices and violence on the ground. This discourse fuels the imagination of people who become hostile to Muslim women and threaten them with indignity.

In France, Muslim women, who find themselves at the intersection of sexist, racist and Islamophobic oppressions, are denied their freedom of action and their most fundamental rights. They are constant victims of violence. Thus, more than 75% of the aggressions against Muslims are attacks against Muslim women (source: ENAR – European Network Against Racism).

France has the largest Muslim community in Europe, estimated at 8% of the total population. However, 44.6% of French people think that Islam is a threat to national identity (Report 2019 – National Consultative Commission on Human Rights). This growing Islamophobia leads to social, cultural and economic discriminations and violence, of which Muslim women are the first victims, at the intersection of institutionalized sexism, racism and Islamophobia. The three issues are not treated equally in the French legal framework, as the word race has been erased from the Constitution and Islamophobia not recognised as a specific discrimination.

For years, Muslim women in France have been at the centre of incessant and dehumanising political debates about their bodies, their choice of clothing, their sexuality. In short, their lives are constantly the subject of fascination, of sterile debates in which they are rarely invited to speak. Today, in France, whatever the field – work, education, art, leisure... - Muslim women are stigmatized, isolated, and ostracised from society. Muslim women wearing the veil see their constitutional rights permanently violated, especially in a country that constantly sets an example of respect for human rights.

At the same time, political institutions participate in the creation of a narrative in which Muslim women are submissive victims or dangerous accomplices of an Islam that threatens republican values, thus conveniently justifying the elaboration of liberticidal laws under the cover of secularism and republican universalism. These segregating and discriminatory laws reinforce stereotypes of Muslim women and find public support because it would be for the good of these women, which favours the multiplication of obstacles, violence and discrimination that aim to exclude Muslim women from the public space: at work, in education, in health, in housing, in access to leisure...

The media and political institutions produce a narrative of a civilisational divide between “Muslim culture” – portrayed as barbaric and archaic – and Western culture, which would be inherently incompatible; thus, justifying xenophobic and Islamophobic policies. The figure of the “veiled woman” likely to invade our society is presented by many politicians and the media as a threat that our society must anticipate in order to preserve the Western “model”.

This treatment is particularly tinged with contempt and paternalism when it comes to women wearing headscarves. From controversy to controversy, we have been witnessing for some time

now a change in the mainstream media discourse: from the status of victims of the machismo of Muslim men, they have become “radicalised”, wearing the headscarf as a political banner.

These representations are often supported by images that reinforce this imaginary mix of fascination, fear and rejection. These choices of illustrations contribute greatly to the construction of a unique figure of “the” Muslim woman, both oppressed and dangerous, sheathed in her black niqab and synonymous with insecurity and a threat to French values.

Alarming consequences in the lives of the main women concerned: far from reflecting the diversity of Muslim women in France, their plural identities and their positive contributions to society, these representations reinforce negative prejudices against them. Although these women are for the most part far removed from these clichés, they suffer daily from the hostile sentiment fuelled by some media outlets that sacrifice them on the altar of the race for clicks and sensationalist news. The veil, the burkini, the length of their skirts...: their bodies and their physical appearance do not fuel the controversies and debates from which they are excluded.

The consequences are particularly worrying when we see the very real impact that these representations and these controversies have on the lives of Muslim women in France. The prejudices and suspicions thus nurtured create a climate in which these women suffer increasing discrimination and violence, at the intersection of racism, sexism and Islamophobia.

According to the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), women, especially veiled women, are the main victims of Islamophobia in France and in Europe. This translates into ever-increasing physical and verbal attacks, as well as discrimination in access to employment, education, health, housing and leisure activities, thus depriving them of economic resources and fundamental rights.

Faced with these facts, it seems urgent to act collectively to ensure that Muslim women are represented in a fairer and more nuanced way in the mainstream French media. Media professionals and citizens alike, it is up to all of us to rethink our practices and adopt new reflexes to create a healthier and more peaceful social climate.

Media professionals: changing the game by making responsible choices

- Let us give Muslim women a voice, especially on issues that directly concern them and on which they have every legitimacy to express themselves.
- Let us echo the voices of Muslim women, listening to their concerns and refusing to impose a populist political agenda.
- Let us make a conscious decision to reject the ease of “sensationalist” content, which is a source of visibility for the media, but above all a source of stigmatisation and division in society.
- Let us highlight pluralistic Muslim women and increase the visibility of their talents, their varied fields of expertise and their contributions to society.